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AUTHOR Schwartz, Lita L.; Isser, Natalie
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ABSTRACT

The legal biculturalism of Canada and the actual multiculturalism of Canada, the United States, and other countries require that we promote in our schools a positive and realistic view of a variety of ethnic cultures. This goal can be met through teacher education, integration of multicultural concepts into the curriculum in appropriate contexts, and the development of improved curriculum materials. Multicultural studies must begin in the primary grades, as research indicates that children's attitudes toward other nations and peoples tend to stabilize by early adolescence. These studies can be combined with mastery of the basic skills, for if the child cannot read and comprehend his assignments, or express her feelings clearly in speaking and writing, the multicultural activities will be less effective. With mastery of basic skills, with unbiased and broad-based texts, and with greater understanding of the values of cultural diversity, the child and the teacher will be able to view more critically and thoughtfully those issues, events, behaviors and beliefs that make up Canada today. (Author/KR)

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INCREASING ETHNIC SENSITIVITY: WHY AND HOW

Lita L. Schwartz and Natalie Isser

The Pennsylvania State University, Ogontz Campus

Canadian School Trustees Association
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Increasing Ethnic Sensitivity: Why and How Toronto, 20 June 1978

Introduction

The concern with increasing ethnic sensitivity in a multicultural society is a realistic one in Canada as well as in the United States. Here in Canada, your problem is compounded because there are two clearly dominant cultural streams in addition to the multitude of national, religious, and racial backgrounds with which we are familiar in the United States. The efforts being made to harmonize, but not melt, the different streams are very apparent in your journal, Multiculturalism, published by the Guidance Centre of the University of Toronto. If we were school trustees, as you are, we would strongly recommend that copies of Multiculturalism be liberally distributed to teachers because of the information, varying perspectives, and lists of resource materials included in each issue.

Why is it so important to increase ethnic sensitivity? Indeed, in what way do we define that phrase? Rest assured, we do not mean to make a hypenated Canadian individual more sensitive to criticism of his group. We do mean to increase the awareness of a Ukranian-Canadian and a Japanese-Canadian to the variances and commonalities of their customs, values, and practices. National growth as well as personal growth require that bigotry and bias be reduced to a minimum, which can best be achieved through education.

We believe that every child must achieve his fullest potential. Education's goal thus must bring not only skills but a positive self-concept. To promote self-esteem, the child must enjoy the respect of his peers and those adults significant to him. To aid this process, the child must have a sense of tradition and respect for his origins and cultural enviroment, as well as adjusting to the larger society in which he must function. Further, it is important to the child to know that his primary groups - his family, his culture - are respected in the community and accepted by that community.

The school as an agency of society has a special function and duty: besides teaching children the majesty of diversity and individualism in human society, it must provide the one learning site where all groups can mingle and communicate with each other. Immigrant children in bilingual schools should be encouraged to remain fluent in their language and heritage while learning to master English. Children should not be deprived of their cultural heritage, but in order for them to exist in the work world and in order for them to communicate effectively in the larger society, to observe and maintain the rich diversity of intellectual resources, they must be helped to learn and preserve their national shared history as Canadians. Therefore, all children master English and French; they must all learn to read and write. They must all observe in both school and society certain codes of behavior, observances, and traditions that are common to the national scene, and that transcend their differences - civility, respect for authority, civic responsibility, honesty, moral probity, and respect for others' rights. These are the qualities, by consensus, necessary for all people, if we are to preserve a civilized and sane society.

It would be impossible for the curriculum, the textbooks, and other materials to include enough pertinent and positive information about each and every immigrant group and its contributions to Canadian culture. What should be emphasized continually in the schools, however, are intergroup relationships - frequently interdependent, and a pride in each person's heritage. Children at very young ages can be taught to appreciate the value of group differences and ethnic characteristics, to be sensitive to others' feelings, and to improve their relations with members of different groups. We believe, on the basis of research evidence, that multicultural education must begin in the lower grades, becuase this is the time when attitudes toward other peoples and countries are

formed. Such attitudes are well-established by the time children are thirteen or fourteen years old.

There has been some improvement in the textbooks, and school administrators now even take into account the problems of minorities in their evaluation of school materials. But the texts, even if improved substantially, cannot influence the students if the students cannot read them with comprehension.

The task of the educator is made far more difficult today because the mass media have reduced the significance of both reading and writing in the overall acquisition of knowledge and experience. The media have made students passive, apathetic receivers of canned information that is often meaningless to them. Constant television viewing has created an audience with limited attention span, an inability to concentrate or to listen for a prolonged time period to complicated or semi-abstract concepts. We need to restore to students the ability to think critically, to analyze, to synthesize, and to evaluate. The attributes are polished and cultivated only through reading and writing when the students have to make choices, judgements, and reason intelligently. Unless all of our children develop a high level of skills in these basic aptitudes, they cannot hope to achieve academically so that they can participate fully in the fruits of a technological society. They will be unable to acquire or profit from the desired opportunities for economic and social equality that are offered.

In any program developed to help children appreciate cultural diversity and to develop understanding for those who differ culturally, cognizance must be taken of the importance of utilizing every opportunity to integrate reading and writing. With this aim anchored firmly at the core of the program, we can suggest a series of recommendations for the improvement of teaching a multicultural curriculum. Skills in reading and writing can be taught, but for the child to remain fluent and articulate, he has to practice them continually. Vocabulary, sentence structure, and composition abilities can

only be learned and strengthened through constant practice. Composition and research papers must be assigned frequently, and supplemental activities must include reading assignments.

We must remember that in the present educational system, the teacher has great importance. The teacher is the pivot of the learning process, especially in the transference of attitudes. She or he can direct the class and subject with considerable independence, and chooses the text material that continues to be important in the classroom. The teacher's prejudices, feelings, and unspoken gestures convey her or his feelings concerning inter-group relations and ethnicity. Thus it is crucial that the teacher be well-educated, knowledgeable, and very sensitive in order to communicate the value of cultural diversity effectively.

Teacher education must therefore be strengthened in this area of content. Teachers should be apprised in their preparation of the importance of cultural diversity, although because of the complexity and cultural wealth of innumberable groups, no one can master all the varieties of experience extant in Canadian life. A further productive way for professionals to serve their communities and schools is to be trained in programs stressing cultural pluralism that are conducted by local colleges and universities. The Master's program in multicultural education at the University of Toronto is one that meets these needs.

We feel that in-service courses, educating teachers in techniques of learning about and working with people of different heritages are equally, if not more, important than additional credits in other methods courses. Understanding language, gestures, customs, and history of these groups leads to the development of empathy, and might ease the tremendous schism that now exists between public institutions, including the schools, and individuals in the local communities.

To mount a significant multicultural curriculum, several approaches can be employed concurrently. Without disturbing the major areas of the social studies curriculum, for example, the primary grades can continue to focus on family and local community relationships, but in a more comparative way. It can easily be shown that every cultural or ethnic group structure has some unique features and some that are common to most groups. At the intermediated level, more emphasis could be placed on cultural diversity and similarity in other fields, and at the secondary level, national policy over the years with regard to immigration could be studied. In conjunction with these emphases, related materials could be introduced into the studies of literature, music, art appreciation, drama, and language arts. To do this effectively, the teachers themselves must be knowledgeable and flexible.

Following the scheme of Bruner's spiral curriculum, concepts from the several disciplines within the social studies can be presented in simple form in the early grades, and re-introduced in gradually more complex ways in higher grades. The concepts of cultural diversity and universality for example, can begin with preschoolers describing themselves and then finding the ways in which they are similar to and different from their classmates. It can be pointed out that a single child may be like several other children in one characteristic (e.g., hair color), part of another group in another characteristic (e.g., eye color), and part of still a third group in a third characteristic (e.g., preferred games), but that all the children can and do take part in a variety of activities together. At a slightly higher grade level, diversity and similarity may focus on ways in which birthdays or holidays are celebrated, <u>always emphasizing</u> that difference does not imply "better" or "worse."

By the middle and upper elementary grades, the themes of multicultural education will be well established and can be demonstrated in variations among ethnic/racial groups in this country, both in terms of immigrants and the current scene, here and abroad. A similar pattern of development can be followed with respect to concepts in economics, geography, history, political science, psychology, and sociology, with several disciplines often integrated into one activity or text.

Next to the teacher, the textbook is most important as a teaching tool. Whatever their limitations, texts in history, and even readers, provide a background of information and learning. Readers and literature collections introduce ideas and vocabulary study; histories provide rudimentary facts that students must learn before they can engage in projects, games, and other stimulating experiences. The variety and richness of the ethnic contributions to Canadian culture and the quality of life, however, is so extensive that no textbook or program can include every such cultural contribution. Even if it were possible to include all groups, many volumes would be required to describe, explain, and assess the role of all the minority groups that play such a marvelous and important part in the creation of the unique Canadian style.

The story of immigration, its influence on contemporary Canadian history, the people and the cultures who have been part of the story, do need to be included in the learning experiences of the young. Similarly, the theme of persecution of minorities as well as their triumphs over adversity needs to be included in the learning experience. These cannot be taught in isolation, however. They are part of mankind's common heritage and are part of contemporary problems. Indeed, much Canadian history of the past two centuries cannot be taught art from world history. We recommend, therefore:

1. that the story of immigration to Canada be taught in the context of world events, whether it be with reference to the Irish potato famine, Russian pogroms, victims of war, Nazi persecution, or dreams of a better life;

2. that selections reflecting immigrant history, prejudice, and culture conflicts be incorporated into reading texts along with stories of inventions, poems, and other content. Teacher's editions as well as student texts should ask pertinent questions, appropriate for the grade level, about the feelings of people in the selections demonstrations of prejudice, biased writing, and similar matters;

3. that supplementary materials relevant to minority groups of the local community be integrated into the curriculum to enrich learning in various subjects.

It is a fact that some groups, especially in urban areas, may be especially predominant in a signle school's population. Recognition of the cultural mores, unique and universal beliefs, heritage, problems, and contributions to the international and national scene of such a group should be part of the curriculum in that school. Specific techniques to be used might include:

1. invitations to leaders of the ethnic group to serve as resource persons for all the children in the school, as well as the teachers and staff.

2. assignment of projects in language arts and social studies courses that focus on the group's history, language, and values, possibly resulting in custom-made instructional materials where commercially published ones are sparse or non-existent.

3. integration of the disciplines should be encouraged and utilized more fully. Literature, history, geography, and even anthropology can illustrate and expand cultural studies. Basic skills, the social sciences, art, and music can be interwoven and used effectively to teach any group culture that the school or teacher wishes to emphasize.

4. Wherever possible, children should visit community groups in action. Some examples are a trip to an Italian market, a Greek Orthodox bazaar, a Ukranian folk festival, Chinatown Cultural Center, or whatever community activity is available.

5. Simulations should always be used in conjunction with interdisciplinary studies.

6. If foreign students attend a local college or university, they might be asked to visit and speak with the children. Recent immigrants to the community might also serve as learning resources in the classroom.

7. Development of a multilingual vocabulary in terms of greetings and words commonly used in the school and home can be used to enrich the study of language arts and prepare for later foreign language study. Discovering the common roots of these words can serve as a basis for studying the different national groups subsumed under a great language umbrella.

8. An ancillary means of studying about other countries can be the use of stamp collections, since stamps portray principal figures and events in a nation's history. Different coinage and monetary systems can be used as well, for mathematics and other subjects.

These are examples of how innovative techniques can be integrated with basic skills in the teaching program. The recommendations we have made are in no way, however, the absolute and solely correct responses to the present educational dilemma. What we are trying to accomplish is to bring to the present educational scene a sense of what is possible. Remaking society, destroying class lines, eradicating poverty, and educational equality cannot be achieved by the schools alone. What can be realized is that our children are taught the skills necessary for them to use as a basis for reaching toward such goals, and a broader and more meaningful concept of intergroup relations so that they can see and move toward such goals.

We believe that innovative, enriching, and multi-media programs can contribute substantially to multicultural education. If the child cannot read and comprehend what he is assigned to read, or cannot express his feelings clearly in speech and writing, however, such activities have diminished effectiveness. We urge most strongly that mastery of the basic skills of language and communication - reading, writing, and speaking - be restored to their position of prime priority in education and be incorporated into all isntructional units. Possession of these abilities will contribute to the child's positive self-concept as a person with capabilities worthy of respect by the society at large. In making this recommendation, we seek to assure the children of all groups that they will have the skills needed to walk any avenue in society.

We stress the need for realistic multicultural education that creates respect for each cultural heritage within the child and his peers, that promotes respect for differences while recognizing similarities, and that maintains the integrity and self-respect of every child. Such a program places a heavy responsibility on textbook authors and publishers and on teacher educators, as well as on the teachers who select and use instructional materials.

With amstery of basic skills, with unbiased and broad-based texts, and with a greater understanding of the values of cultural diversity, the child and the teacher will be able to view more critically and thoughtfully those issues and events, the behaviors and beliefs, that make up Canada today. That is the least to which we as educators should aspire; it may be the most that we can realistically attain.